

P 191317Z MAY 88
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5978
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY RABAT
AMEMBASSY ROME

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 05278

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: RAMADAN IN TUNISIA: OBSERVANCE AND
TOLERANCE

11. C O N F I D E N T I A L -- ENTIRE TEXT.

SUMMARY

12. IN ITS FIRST RAMADAN SINCE COMING TO POWER LAST FALL, THE NEW GOVERNMENT HAS BROKEN WITH THE SECULARISM OF THE PREVIOUS REGIME AND ACTIVELY PROMOTED RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES. IN DOING SO, HOWEVER, IT HAS ENCOURAGED TOLERANCE OF NON-FASTING MOSLEMS AND TOURISTS. GOT'S MEASURES CREATED AN UNPRECEDENTED ESPRIT DE CORPS AMONG TUNISIANS WHO OBSERVED THE HOLY MONTH. THE PROMOTION OF SUCH RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES REFLECTS NOT ONLY PIETY, BUT ALSO A DESIRE TO STEAL THE THUNDER FROM ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS. END SUMMARY.

GOT PROMOTES RAMADAN

13. PRESIDENT ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI AND HIS GOVERNMENT HAVE BROKEN WITH THE PREVIOUS REGIME'S SECULAR APPROACH TO RAMADAN. UNDER BOURGUIBA, GOT'S OFFICIAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE HOLY MONTH WAS AT BEST NEUTRAL. ONCE, WHEN THE FORMER PRESIDENT APPEARED ON NATIONAL TV DRINKING A GLASS OF ORANGE JUICE AND DISPARAGING RAMADAN AS AN IMPEDIMENT TO DEVELOPMENT, IT WAS OPENLY HOSTILE. THIS DISTANCING FROM RAMADAN OBSERVANCE WAS ALWAYS OUT OF STEP WITH THE FOLKWAYS OF THE COUNTRY. TUNISIANS, HOWEVER, HAD SUCH RESPECT FOR THE FORMER PRESIDENT THAT HIS SECULARISM DID NOT POSE A MAJOR POLITICAL PROBLEM UNTIL LATE IN HIS RULE.

14. BY CONTRAST, THIS YEAR THE GOT HAS ACTIVELY REVIVED TUNISIA'S CUSTOMS AND FOLKWAYS REGARDING RAMADAN. EARLY ON THE GOT DROPPED THE CALENDAR METHOD (BASED ON SCIENTIFIC CALCULATIONS) USED BY THE PREVIOUS REGIME TO DETERMINE THE ONSET AND END OF THE MONTH AND OPTED FOR THE SIGHTING METHOD (BASED ON ACTUAL HUMAN SIGHTING OF THE NEW MOON) WHICH IS CONSIDERED MORE TRADITIONAL. (ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS HAD LONG CHAMPIONED THE SIGHTING METHOD). GOT ALSO RETURNED TO THE TUNISIAN CUSTOM OF USING CANON BLASTS TO ANNOUNCE THE BEGINNING AND BREAKING OF THE DAILY FASTS. FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE FRENCH LANGUAGE TELEVISION STATION CARRIED A LARGE NUMBER OF RELIGIOUS PROGRAMS. FURTHER, GOT ORDERED THE REHABILITATION OF 190 MOSQUES AND SPONSORED CONCERTS AND OTHER CULTURAL ACTIVITIES AT NIGHT IN THE TUNIS MEDINA DURING THE ENTIRE MONTH. THE PRESIDENT AND OTHER SENIOR OFFICIALS PROMINENTLY ATTENDED LOCAL CEREMONIES.

15. TOWARDS NON-FASTING MOSLEMS AND TOURISTS, HOWEVER, THE GOT FOLLOWED THE TOLERANT POLICY OF THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT. THIS RAMADAN (17 APRIL - 15 MAY) CORRESPONDED WITH THE START OF THE TOURIST SEASON, AND THE HOTELS AND OTHER FACILITIES THAT CATER TO TOURISTS OPERATED NORMALLY. AS UNDER BOURGUIBA, DRINKING AND SMOKING OUTSIDE CAFES WERE EFFECTIVELY

DISCOURAGED, BUT THE LARGER CAFES WERE PACKED INSIDE WITH NON-FASTING TUNISIANS. PUBLIC BARS STOPPED SERVING ALCOHOL, AND ONE MAJOR BAR DOWNTOWN WAS VEILED TO HIDE CLIENTS SMOKING CIGARETTES AND DRINKING SOFT DRINKS. SOME OF THE SMALLER RESTAURANTS AND CAFES CLOSED BY PERSONAL CHOICE. AS BEST WE CAN DETERMINE, THERE WAS ONLY ONE MAJOR EXCEPTION. ISLAMISTS AT THE UNIVERSITY HARASSED STUDENTS WHO DID NOT OBSERVE THE FAST, BUT SUCH HARASSMENT SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN RESTRICTED TO THE CAMPUSES.

FOR THE PUBLIC, A "LIGHT" RAMADAN

¶6. SEVERAL AVERAGE TUNISIANS HAVE DESCRIBED THIS YEAR'S RAMADAN TO US AS "LIGHT" (KHFIF), IE, AN EASY ONE. THE MILD WEATHER OVER THE PAST MONTH CONTRIBUTED SOMEWHAT. THE GOT'S MEASURES, HOWEVER, CREATED AN ESPRIT DE CORPS AMONG THOSE WHO BORE THE INCONVENIENCE OF THE FAST THAT DID NOT EXIST UNDER BOURGUIBA. EXPLAINING THIS ESPRIT DE CORPS, TUNISIANS MENTION THE SIGHTING METHOD WHICH ENABLED EVERYONE TO START AND END RAMADAN AT THE SAME TIME, THUS AVOIDING THE SOCIAL AWKWARDNESS OF SOME FASTING AND OTHERS NOT. THEY ALSO SAY THAT GOT'S REVIVAL OF LOCAL TRADITIONS, WITH THE NOSTALGIA AND AWARENESS OF A SHARED CULTURAL HERITAGE THE TRADITIONS EVOKED, FOSTERED A SENSE OF TOGETHERNESS. PARENTS HAVE REMARKED, FOR EXAMPLE, THEIR SATISFACTION IN TAKING CHILDREN OUT TO LOOK FOR THE NEW MOON AND EXPLAINING ITS SIGNIFICANCE. BEN ALI'S APPEARANCE AT RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES AND THE UNPRECEDENTED MEDIA COVERAGE SHOWED THAT THEY WERE NOT ALONE IN FASTING. AT EMBASSY FUNCTIONS, WESTERNIZED TUNISIANS OF THE ELITE WHO ORDINARILY DRINK ALCOHOL ABSTAINED AND REMARKED THAT MORE OF THEIR FRIENDS WERE OBSERVING RAMADAN THAN BEFORE.

COMMENT: GOT GETS IN SYNC WITH POPULAR RELIGION

¶7. GOT'S APPROACH TO RAMADAN IS THE LATEST INDICATION THAT IT WANTS TO GET IN SYNC WITH POPULAR RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT. EARLIER EXAMPLES INCLUDED BEN ALI'S NUMEROUS GESTURES TO ISLAM AND AND THE HEAVY COVERAGE OF THE RELIGIOUS RITES HE PERFORMED WHILE ON A FORMAL VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA.

¶8. PART OF THIS APPROACH MAY STEM FROM PERSONAL PIETY, BUT PART ALSO STEMS FROM A DESIRE TO PREVENT ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS FROM BECOMING A GREATER POLITICAL FORCE. GOT HAS ADOPTED THOSE ITEMS OF THE ISLAMIC AGENDA THAT MESH WITH TUNISIA'S TOLERANT FOLKWAYS (EG, ISLAMIC INCANTATIONS, VIP ATTENDANCE AT RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES, PROMOTION OF RAMADAN, ETC.) BUT ESCHEWED THOSE PURITANICAL ITEMS (REVISION OF THE PERSONAL STATUS CODE, RESTRICTIONS ON TOURISTS) THAT WOULD RADICALLY CHANGE TUNISIA.

PELLETREAU